

(12) UK Patent Application (19) GB (11) 2 297 663 (13) A

(43) Date of A Publication 07.08.1998

(21) Application No 9502167.1

(22) Date of Filing 03.02.1996

(71) Applicant(s)

The General Electric Company p l c

(Incorporated in the United Kingdom)

1 Stanhope Gate, LONDON, W1A 1EH,
United Kingdom

(72) Inventor(s)

Alan John Jones

David Nicholas Seahill

(74) Agent and/or Address for Service

GEC Patent Department

Waterhouse Lane, CHELMSFORD, Essex, CM1 2QX,
United Kingdom

(51) INT CL⁶

H04M 11/00

(52) UK CL (Edition O)

H4K KOC

(56) Documents Cited

GB 2279210 A

EP 0527072 A2

(58) Field of Search

UK CL (Edition N) H4K KOC

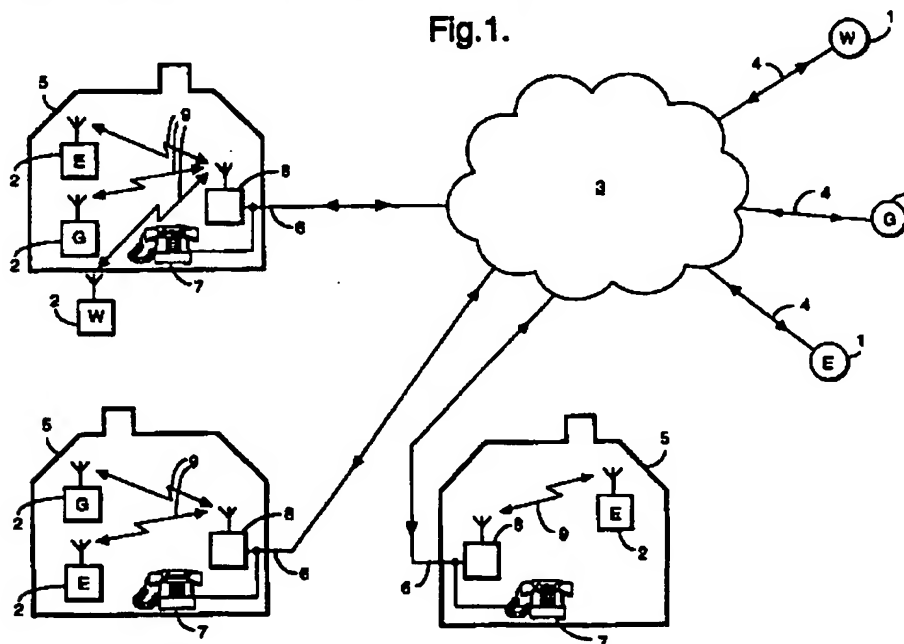
INT CL⁶ H04M

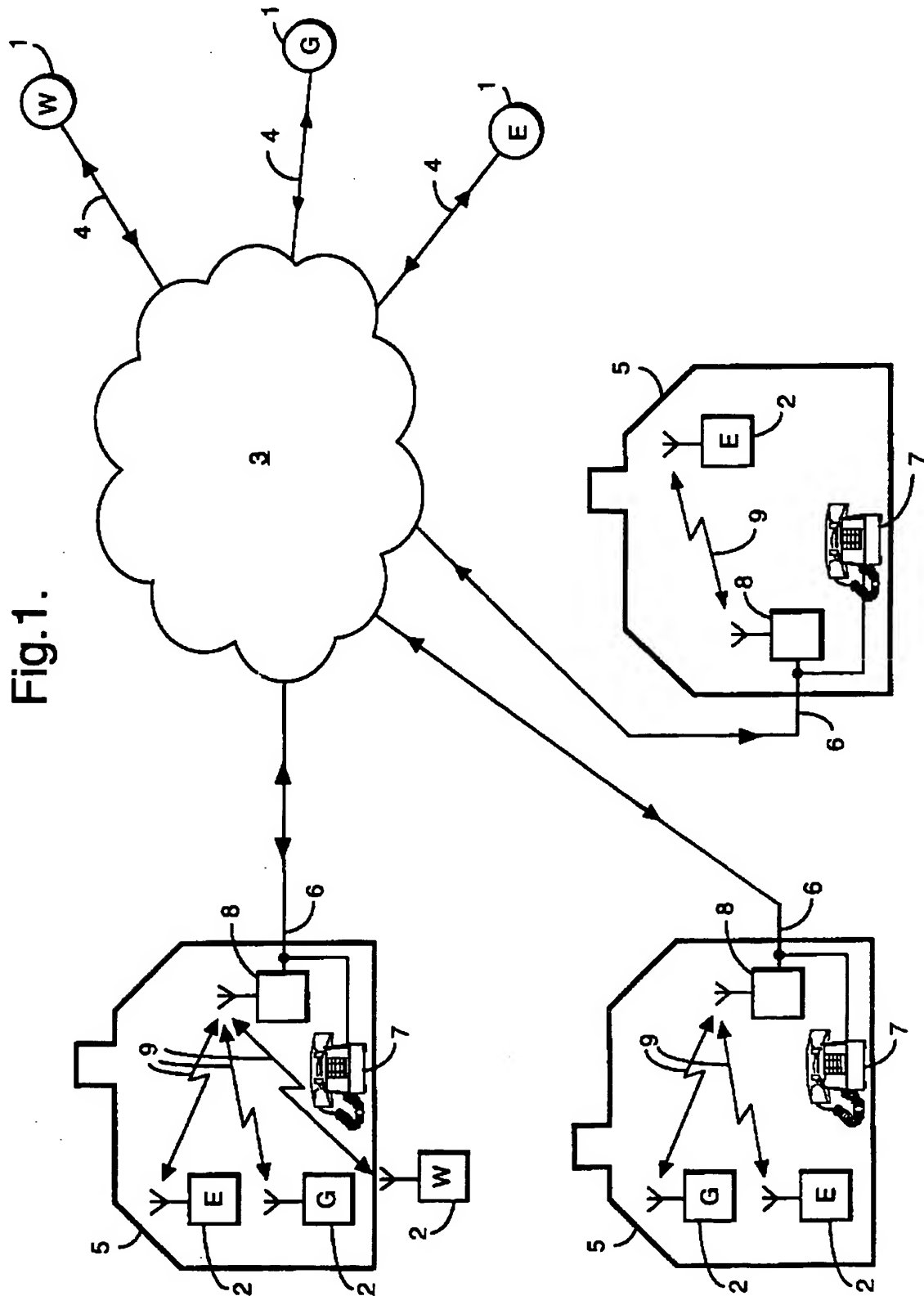
Online: WPI

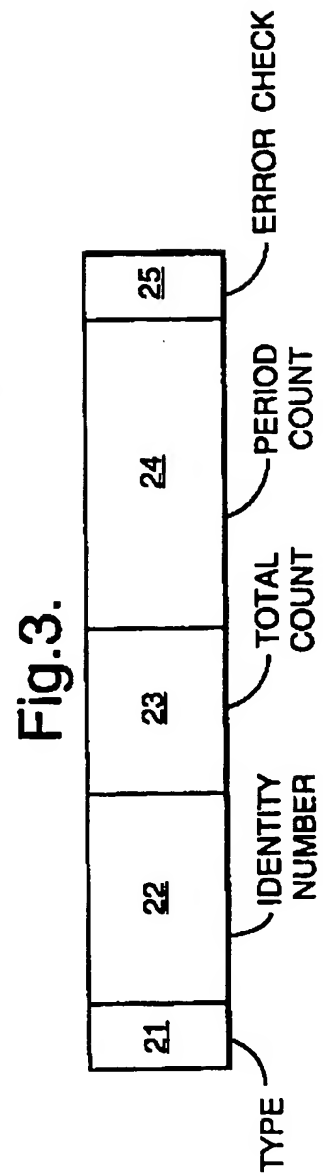
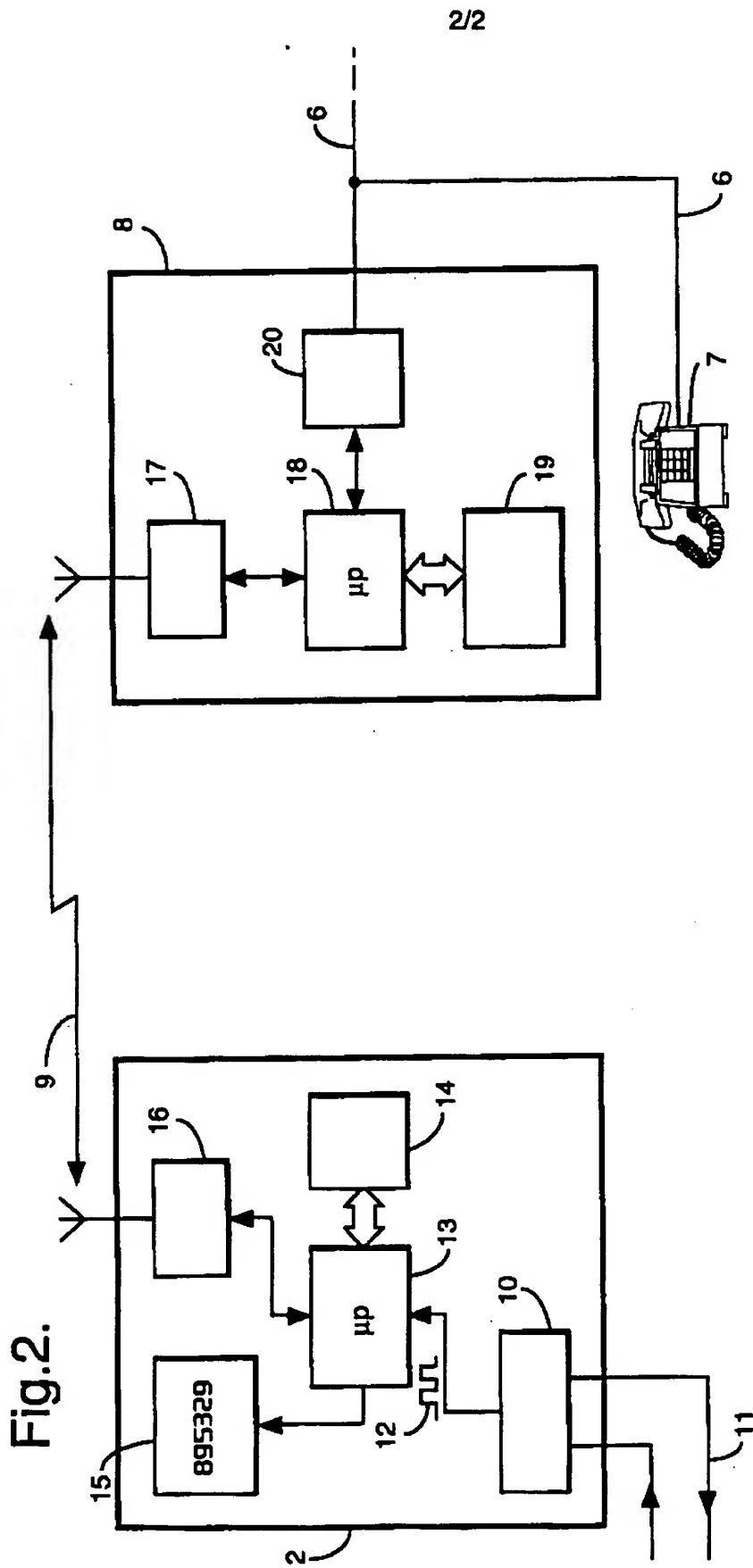
(54) Remote meter reading

(57) A system for remote reading of utility consumption registering meters comprises a data collection point (1) connected with a telecommunications network (3); a respective link (8) to the telecommunications network for each of a plurality of utility consumers (5); a respective meter reading unit (8) connected to the consumer's end of each said link and which includes a first radio transceiver (16); and at least one utility consumption meter (2) which includes a second transceiver (17) arranged for radio communication with the transceiver of the meter reading unit, whereby consumption data may be sent from the meter via the radio link (9) between the first and second radio transceivers and the telecommunications network to the data collection point.

Fig.1.







REMOTE METER READING

The present invention relates to a system for remote reading of utility consumption registering meters.

With the privatisation of many of the companies providing metered utilities, for example
5 electricity, water and gas, and the resultant need to improve efficiency, remote meter
reading is becoming increasingly attractive. Despite continued efforts to install utility
consumption registering meters in areas of public access, many thousands of meters still
remain behind locked doors. It is not always possible for utility consumers to be present
when the utility supplier wishes to make a meter reading. Inaccessibility is therefore a
10 source of annoyance both for the utility supplier and consumer alike. Remote reading,
which does not require access to the consumer's premises, is therefore advantageous in
these circumstances.

Many systems for remote reading of utility consumption meters, particularly electricity
15 consumption meters, have been proposed. One system of remotely reading electricity
consumption meters is via the existing supply cabling using power line signalling. This
method is attractive for two reasons: (1) by definition all consumers are connected to the
supply network and are therefore connected to the communications network; and (2) the
control and ownership of this network is owned by the utility supplier. Power line
20 signalling is, however, expensive due to the complexity of the circuitry required.

For the suppliers of utilities other than electricity, systems that utilise existing

communications networks or which share the network between utility suppliers are preferred. For example, radio based systems have been proposed in which a series of fixed base stations are provided to communicate with utility meters which include either a transceiver or transmitter. With a meter which includes a transceiver, two-way
5 communication is possible allowing the utility meter not only to be remotely read but also remotely programmed. Data from the fixed base stations is communicated back to regional, or central, data collection points either using further radio links or using existing telecommunications networks. Billing information is prepared from this data which is then sent to the consumer. To reduce costs, the trend has been to reduce the
10 number of base stations by making each capable of accessing as many meters as possible, typically a hundred or more, the limit being determined by the maximum operating power of the meter radio transmitter/transceiver. It has also been proposed to use mobile base stations, which travel from one geographical area to another collecting data from a large number of meters. A disadvantage of these radio based
15 systems is finding an available frequency amongst the already crowded airwaves and the costs of the licence necessary to operate on such frequencies. A need exists therefore for a remote utility meter reading system that overcomes some of the aforementioned problems.

20 According to the present invention there is provided a system for remote reading of utility consumption registering meters comprising: a data collection point connected with a telecommunications network; a respective link to the telecommunications network for each of a plurality of utility consumers; a respective meter reading unit connected to the consumer's end of each said link and which includes a first radio transceiver; and at least

one utility consumption meter which includes a second transceiver arranged for radio communication with the transceiver of the meter reading unit, whereby consumption data may be sent from the meter via the radio link between the first and second radio transceivers and the telecommunications network to the data collection point. By
5 employing the present invention it is possible to use low power radio transceivers which do not require a licence to operate. Such transceivers could, for example, have an operating range of approximately one hundred metres.

It is preferred that the meter reading unit is arranged to communicate with consumption
10 meters on the same premises.

One system in accordance with the invention will now be described, by way of example only, with reference to the accompanying drawings, in which:

15 Figure 1 is a schematic representation of the system;

Figure 2 is a block diagram of a utility consumption meter and meter reading unit of the system; and

20 Figure 3 is a representation of the transmitted data format used in the system.

Referring to Figure 1, the system has a plurality of data collection points 1 for collecting meter reading data from a plurality of utility consumption registering meters 2. Three data collection points are shown, in which each corresponds to a respective utility -

water, gas or electricity - as indicated by the reference letters W, G and E in the Figure. Each data collection point 1 is connected to a telecommunications network 3 by means of a suitable connection 4.

5 Each utility consumer 5 has a telephone line 6, or suitable transmission line link, which connects the consumer's telephone 7, or other equipment such as facsimile machines, to the telecommunications network 3. Also connected to the consumer's telephone line 6 is a meter reading unit 8 for remotely reading the consumer's utility consumption registering meters 2. The meter reading unit 8 communicates with the consumer's
10 consumption meters 2 by means of low power radio links 9 and is capable of addressing up to a maximum of ten consumption meters 2. The consumer's consumption meters 2 may be located either in the consumer's premises 5 or in close proximity thereto, as for example in the case of a water consumption meter 2.

15 Referring to Figure 2, a utility consumption meter 2 is shown and comprises a sensor 10, processor 13, memory 14, display means 15 and a low power transceiver circuit 16. The sensor 10 detects consumption of a utility 11 and produces a pulse 12 for each unit of the utility 11 consumed. The processor 13 is arranged to count these pulses and determine the total number of units of the utility 11 consumed since the meter was commissioned
20 and the number of units consumed in a selected period; the selected period being set by the utility supplier. These consumption data, that is total and selected period counts, are stored in a memory 14. The display means 15 is provided for displaying information to the consumer such as for example the total number of units consumed, the time and date, whether the current tariff is at high or low rate etc. The processor 13 also controls

a low power transceiver circuit 16 which is capable of two-way radio communication with a second low power radio transceiver circuit 17 in the meter reading unit 8.

The low power radio transceivers 16, 17, which are multi-channel circuits, are capable
5 of operating on a range of frequencies.

Each meter reading unit 8 also comprises a microprocessor 18, a memory 19 and an interface 20 as shown in Figure 2. The interface 20 provides matching between the consumer's telephone line 6 and the meter reading unit 8 and could, for example in the
10 case of an analogue telephone line 6, comprise a modem. With the introduction of the Integrated Services Digital Network (ISDN) in the near future, which brings access to digital communication to the consumer level, the interface 20 could comprise a suitable ISDN digital interface.

15 In operation of the system, the meter's processor 13 is configured to periodically convey the total number of units of utility consumed and the selected period count to the associated meter reading unit 8. This data is stored in the meter reading unit's memory 19 together with consumption data from other utility meters. With each meter reading unit 8 storing consumption data for up to ten utility consumption meters 2, it is preferred
20 that each meter 2 has its own unique identity number which is transmitted with the consumption data. The meter reading unit's microprocessor 18 is programmed to convey this data, at pre-set intervals or at a specific time, to the respective data collection point 1 by means of the telecommunications network 3.

Preferably the interface 20 is such that communication with the network can be made without affecting the operation of the consumer's telephone 7, for example using a "non-ring" service, over-voice communication or other known technique. So that the consumer is not charged for the meter reading process all communication preferably uses a "Freefone" number or other such free service.

In an alternative arrangement the data collection point could interrogate the meter reading units by calling the respective meter reading unit, such a call preferably being made at a time which is unlikely to cause annoyance to the consumer using a "non-ring" service. In the system illustrated full duplex communication is possible between the meter reading unit 8 and utility consumption meter 2. In addition, therefore, to conveying consumption data to the data collection point, the meter and/or meter reading unit can be updated or programmed by the utility supplier, with information such as current tariff rates, the changeover times between low and high tariff rates, the selected period for logging consumption, etc.

The data format used in transmitting data from the meter 2 to the meter reading unit 8 is shown in Figure 3. Referring to Figure 3, the data format includes five data fields. The first, 21, is a type identifier field and indicates the type of utility meter, for example whether it is a gas, water, or electricity and whether it is a pre-payment meter. The second data field, 22, is an address field which is four bytes in length and includes the unique identity number of the meter. The third data field, 23, which is three bytes in length, corresponds to total number of units consumed. The fourth data field, 24, represents five sets of consumption readings for the previous five selected charge

periods. Finally, the fifth field, 25, is provided for error checking purposes such as parity checking.

For billing purposes, each utility consumption meter 2 must be associated with (1) a particular respective meter reading unit 8 and (2) with a particular consumer and account number. Preferably the association of the meter 2 and meter reading unit 8 is established automatically upon installation of the utility meter 2. To this end the utility meter's processor 13 is configured such that upon installation of the meter, the meter's transceiver 16 listens for an encoded signal on a given channel which is periodically transmitted by the meter reading unit 8. Upon detecting this encoded signal, the meter 2 transmits, on the same channel, its unique identity number and a flag indicating that it is not currently associated with a meter reading unit 8. Provided the meter reading unit 8 is not already associated with the maximum allowable number of meters 2 it will acknowledge the transmission from the newly installed meter 2.

15

Following installation and association with a meter reading unit 8, the meter's unique identity number needs to be associated with the consumer and their account number. A number of ways of doing this are possible, ranging from simple manual means to those requiring hand-held equipment used by the installer. Association of the consumer with the meter need not be established at the time of installation. One preferred method is for each meter to be provided with a detachable bar code label which includes the meter's identity number. Preferably the bar code label consists of two parts, each part carrying the same data and unique identity number. One half of the label is removed at the time of installation and taken back to the control centre, or data collection point, where the

20

code can be manually entered into the central computer against the consumer's name, address and account number. The part of the label remaining on the meter is provided for identifying the meter during manual meter readings which may be required periodically.

CLAIMS

1. A system for remote reading of utility consumption registering meters comprising: a data collection point connected with a telecommunications network; a respective link to the telecommunications network for each of a plurality of utility consumers; a respective meter reading unit connected to the consumer's end of each said link and which includes a first radio transceiver; and at least one utility consumption meter which includes a second transceiver arranged for radio communication with the transceiver of the meter reading unit, whereby consumption data may be sent from the meter via the radio link between the first and second radio transceivers and the telecommunications network to the data collection point.
2. A system according to claim 1 in which each said link comprises a respective consumer's telephone line.
3. A system according to claim 1 or 2, in which the meter reading unit is arranged to communicate with consumption meters on the same premises.
4. A system according to any preceding claim in which the first and second radio transceivers have a maximum operating range of substantially one hundred metres.
5. A system according to any preceding claim in which each utility meter is configured upon installation to automatically associate itself with a particular meter reading unit.

6. A system for remote reading of utility consumption registering meters substantially as hereinbefore described with reference to the accompanying drawings.

X: Document indicating lack of novelty or of inventive step.

P: Document published on or after the declared priority date but before the filing date of the present application.

Y: Document indicating lack of inventive step if combined with one or more other documents of the same category.

E: Patent document published on or after, but with priority date earlier than, the filing date of the present application.

A: Document indicating technological background and/or state of the art.

&: Member of the same patent family; corresponding document.

Databases:The UK Patent Office database comprises classified collections of GB, EP, WO and US patent specifications as outlined periodically in the Official Journal (Patents). The on-line databases considered for search are also listed periodically in the Official Journal (Patents).